

VZCZCXRO6586
RR RUEHMR RUEHPA
DE RUEHJL #0174 0801332
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 211332Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY BANJUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6497
INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEHC/USDA FAS WASHDC
RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHDC
RUEHPH/CDC ATLANTA GA
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 0243

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANJUL 000174

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR OES NANCY POWELL
USDA ALSO FOR APHIS
ACCRA FOR USAID/WARP
ROME FOR FODAG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/20/2016

TAGS: [TBIO](#) [KFLU](#) [EAID](#) [AMED](#) [EAGR](#) [GA](#)

SUBJECT: UPDATE: SUSPECTED AVIAN INFLUENZA CASES IN THE
GAMBIA

REF: BANJUL 132 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Consular Section Chief Christopher Zimmer, reason 1.4 (b
and d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Suspected AI cases, fi(s" e o*ted in reftel on March 1, 2006, have yet tt be sent for testing, according to FAO and Government of The Gambia (GOTG) sources. The FAO country representative referred to the outcome as a politically-motivated decision that contradicted the advice of medical experts. FAO and Ministry of Health (MOH) sources expressed frustration with perceived inaction by senior GOTG officials over AI preparations. Post, in coordination with UN agencies and others, will continue to press the GOTG to address AI precautions. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) FAO Resident Representative Mr. David Bowen, reported to Conoff on March 17, 2006 that dead birds were not sent on March 1st to London for testing for AI as originally suggested (reftel). He alleged that politically-motivated decisions were made by unspecified senior GOTG officials not to send the samples for testing. No testing facilities currently exist in The Gambia and all samples must be sent to Senegal or OIE reference laboratories.

¶3. (C) While the Minister and Permanent Secretaries for Health both denied the existence of any suspected cases, a senior official in the MOH's Epidemiology and Disease Control unit confirmed to Conoff that GOTG was holding samples of dead birds that he referred to as suspected cases. He expressed frustration with both the Minister and the recently appointed PermSec, saying that they were not trained epidemiologists and did not understand the ramifications of delaying the diagnosis of a potential AI outbreak.

¶4. (C) FAO's Bowen also expressed frustration with requests for funding coming from GOTG. He said FAO has USD 20,000 available for urgent assistance, but the GOTG request was for fuel and phone cards rather than for personal protective equipment, vaccines, disinfectants, and other equipment that is lacking in The Gambia. (NOTE: The latest draft of the AI action plan under development by GOTG designates one million US dollars, or more than one-third of its USD 2.7 million budget, for new vehicles, fuel, and equipment for various government agencies. The draft plan is reported septel. END NOTE.) He also noted that an offer by the Medical Research Council (MRC) to seek funding for conversion of a laboratory to run basic AI testing was brushed aside by the Minister of

Health as he prefers equipping the Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital (RVTH) with a new laboratory. Although RVTH is The Gambia's primary medical facility, it is very basic and its resources are already stretched thin. The MRC, by contrast, is an internationally known tropical disease research institute with several highly-skilled virologists on staff.

15. (C) Post also received confirmation that many of the samples came from the Tanji area (an atlantic coastal area near Banjul) where embassy staff reported seeing unusually high levels of dead birds at the end of February. This information was passed to the Minister of Health on February 128. At the time, the Minister claimed these were baseless rumors.

16. (C) COMMENT: With Gambia hosting the mid-term Africa Union Summit at the end of June and the Gambian economy's heavy reliance on tourism and agriculture, GOTG officials are wary of anything that could be detrimental to the country's image. While the trained epidemiologists in MOH seem genuinely concerned with testing for and containing AI, the actions of the senior officials are a cause for concern. Post will continue to work with the UN agencies and other missions to push GOTG officials to address AI precautions. END COMMENT.
STAFFORD